

VZCZCXYZ0034
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRB #0132/01 0411750
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 101750Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9669
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS RABAT 000132

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [SNAR](#) [KCOR](#) [KCRM](#) [SP](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: TAOUNATE TOUGH ON CANNABIS

REF: A. 08 RABAT 01049
[1](#)B. RABAT 00090

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Following success in western Morocco, Morocco's anti-cannabis efforts now focus on Taounate, a province in the Rif mountains on the eastern side of the major growing areas. Provincial authorities are making strong efforts to educate local residents about the negative aspects associated with cannabis cultivation and to keep it contained to areas outside of Taounate. GOM officials significantly increased their cannabis related arrests in 2008 and plan to continue their aggressive eradication and crop substitution programs which include saffron and roses to replace cannabis. Taounate accounted for 22 percent of all the cannabis fields eradicated in Morocco in 2008. Ministry of Interior Officials want to change Morocco's negative image as the world's largest producer of hashish but cannabis cultivation continues in the heart of Morocco's growing zone.
End Summary.

Cannabis History in Taounate

[1](#)2. (SBU) Poloff recently traveled to the province of Taounate to witness first hand the region's efforts to eliminate cannabis trade. The province is situated near the borders of the Al Hoceima and Chefchaouen provinces in the Rif mountain region of northern Morocco. Large cannabis farms first appeared in the 1990s in the northern portion of Taounate. This drug became a preferred cash crop for many of the local subsistence farmers because the climate was suitable for cultivation, the plant flourished with little effort on the part of the farmers, and it generated a steady income for those living in a greatly impoverished area. Although popular among the local population, cannabis cultivation had a negative impact on health and regional development. Government officials began a serious cannabis eradication program in 2004 focused on 1) a strong awareness campaign, 2) eradicating drug fields and prosecuting guilty cannabis farmers, and 3) reconvertng drug fields and finding economic substitutions for the illegal crop (Ref A).

Public Awareness Campaign

[1](#)3. (SBU) Taounate Governor Mohammed Fettal relayed to Poloff that he has mobilized gendarme, forestry and auxiliary forces to show local residents that there are better alternatives to earn a living than by growing cannabis. Authorities instruct citizens of the health dangers related to drug usage as well as the economic consequences one faces if they are arrested for cultivating the illegal crop. The Forest Administration educates the local population on the environmental dangers of deforestation and soil erosion resulting from cannabis farmers burning large swaths of land during cannabis cultivation land preparations.

¶4. (SBU) Officials took Poloff to a mountain viewpoint where we could see billowing black smoke rising from a forest located in the neighboring province of Al Hoceima. "You see that smoke?", asked the Forestry officer. "They are burning the land in preparation to plant cannabis in a few months. You no longer see that happen here in Taounate. If it does, we will immediately arrest those involved. We now focus our efforts to contain the cannabis cultivation. We want to keep it out of our province and in Al Hoceima and Chefchaouen."

Eradication and Prosecution Efforts

¶5. (SBU) From January to October 31, 2008, Taounate authorities seized 20,000 kg of cannabis, 857 kg of hashish, and eradicated twenty-two percent (2,795 hectare acres) of the combined total 12,500 hectare acres of cannabis crops eradicated throughout all of Morocco. During the same time period, 159 individuals were arrested for the role they played in cannabis cultivation in the province, a significant increase over previous years. Authorities arrested only 13 individuals in both 2006 and 2007 respectively. Convicted offenders face prison sentences ranging from one month to seven years and fines between 1000 dirham (117 USD) and 8,000 dirham (941 USD), depending upon the seriousness of the offense.

¶6. (SBU) Governor Fettal informed Poloff that he wants to make all of Taounate's 49 communes "cannabis-free" zones in the near future. Since 2004, authorities in Taounate reduced the number of communes known to grow cannabis from 21 to 16. They plan to reduce that number down to 10 in 2009.

¶7. (SBU) Authorities escorted Poloff to a remote field along a riverbed that once flourished with cannabis. Barley now grows in its place and community leaders work in close cooperation with provincial authorities to keep cannabis producers out of town. There is beginning to be a negative stigma attached to cannabis cultivation. Although no cannabis fields were currently growing in Taounate during the time of the visit, authorities invited Poloff to return in the summer to witness organized eradication efforts.

Finding Economic Substitutions

¶8. (SBU) Authorities in Taounate are leading a massive campaign to reclaim lands once used to cultivate cannabis and introduce local farmers to legitimate sources of income such as animal husbandry and planting orchards of various types. Between 2005-2007, authorities distributed 1,340,968 plants of different varieties (olives, prunes, figs, pomegranates, etc.) to farmers throughout the region. In 2008, authorities assisted area orchards in Taounate by providing 183,000 olive trees, 57,000 prune trees, and 250,000 carob trees.

¶9. (SBU) National Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (NIMAP) Director Hmamouchi Mohamed escorted Poloff on a tour of the impressive 4,500 square meter facility located on 29 hectares of land that the GOM commissioned in Taounate in 2002 to study the viability of substitute crops in the region. Sadly, the modern institute full of state of the art equipment appeared to be largely empty and underutilized due to lack of funds for continued support.

¶10. (SBU) In spite of their limited resources, the Institute continues to conduct research with current emphasis on testing the viability of saffron and roses as crop substitutes. According to NIMAP officials, saffron has the potential to yield annually up to 800,000 dirham (\$94,117 USD) and roses up to 625,000 dirham (\$73,529 USD) per hectare acre in the international market. Such high value crops could be lucrative sources of income for local cannabis farmers who currently earn roughly 46,000 dirham (\$5,411 USD) annually per person.

Bottom Line

¶11. (SBU) MOI officials told Poloff that Morocco is tired of being labeled as the "world's largest producer of hashish" and it is working hard to change that image. Officials in Taounate admit that much work is required before their Province can be declared "cannabis free".

¶12. (SBU) Comment: We believe MOI and provincial authorities are serious in their efforts to combat drugs as evidenced by the actions in Taounate and the January arrest of a major international drug trafficking ring involving numerous members of the Moroccan armed forces (Ref B). Nonetheless, despite successes in Taounate and Larache provinces, cultivation appears to be continuing in the heart of Morocco's growing zone. End Comment.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

Jackson